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## Listen – You May Save Someone's Life

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## Listen – You May Save Someone's Life

**By Erin O'Flaherty**

UCF Forum columnist

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Until I was 13, I had never attended a funeral and always assumed that the first one I attended would be that of an elderly, distant relative, maybe as the result of a peaceful and natural passing.

I certainly never envisioned my first funeral experience would be to watch my 14-year-old best friend's body being lowered into the ground as the result of a lonely death in his closet by his own hand. Vague are the last words he said to me, but the memories we shared are fresh in my mind.

"It's Joseph." These two words spoken to me on a Friday morning by a friend in the parking lot of my middle school shattered my current world and gave my future world purpose.

These two words were all that she uttered, giving away nothing and everything at the same time, instantly providing an explanation for the other people in the parking lot hunched over as if they couldn't breathe. As these two small words rang in my head on repeat mode, I, too, lost my breath, already knowing the full story. In recent months, amidst struggling with transferring schools and learning the social ropes of a new, intimidating environment, Joseph had been having an internal struggle that often led to suicidal thoughts. He confided in us, his close circle of friends, and shared these thoughts that we collectively tried to comfort.

According to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, the number of Americans who die by suicide each year is nearly double the number of Americans who die by homicide and car accidents combined. Moreover, 1,100 college students lose their lives to suicide each year, and suicide within our military is at an all-time high.

I recall being told by my mother and others to focus only on what I can control. Wouldn't suicide-prevention efforts to help others come under that category?

Absolutely.

September is National Suicide Prevention Month. During this month, it is especially important to stress that suicide is preventable. There are *always* signs, desperate cries for help, and it is our responsibility to be able to recognize them when they appear.

But what will happen when September ends? Raising awareness for just one month isn't enough; we need to keep it in the forefront all year long.

Suicide has long been a taboo subject with many people. It is viewed as a shameful way to die, and families and friends left behind by suicide are often reluctant to share their stories for fear that the social stigma associated with it will cloud the legacy and cherished memories of the passed loved one. While I can appreciate their sentiment and acknowledge that the stigma unfortunately is real, I couldn't disagree more with this approach.

Not only do suicide prevention efforts save the lives of others, but I've also found it therapeutic to my own mourning and healing process over the past eight years to share the story of my friend.

I remember thinking that I would never smile again after Joseph died. Then the first time I did, I remember feeling guilty for it. I was eating maraschino cherries at a Ruby Tuesday. I wondered how that, of all things, did the trick. It's peculiar the details we remember sometimes.

I was never granted closure in Joseph's death in the sense of an explanation. When Joseph took his life, he left no note. I will never know why March 23, 2006, was the day he decided to end his life. The date has a scarring significance in my life that is greater than any birthday or holiday. I have a hole in my heart that will never close because the only person who can provide the answers to my questions is gone. I have nothing but memories and pictures to cherish, and I will never have more than that.

At the time, Joseph's actions made me angrier and more hurt than I ever thought possible, but I still love and appreciate him now that he is gone.

Sometimes it's odd how the world works, how tragedy results in such extreme irony. What I have learned, though, is not only is suicide preventable, it is also possible to smile again, knowing that we have the power to create legacies for those who weren't given enough time to do so for themselves. Moreover, we have the power to give those at risk the resources to live full lives and create their own legacies.

We likely all will know someone in our lifetime that is at risk for suicide. We also, I hope, make efforts to be civically engaged. What better way is there to combine the two, by becoming engaged in a cause that contributes to such a large number of preventable deaths and that would, if continued to be ignored, affect most people in their lifetime?

I urge you to find your motivation beyond September's National Suicide Prevention Month to help end suicide.

What motivates *me* each day to talk, to care, to listen?

It's Joseph.

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